

Living with Cat Allergies

Nearly a third of Americans with allergies are allergic to cats and dogs. And twice as many people have cat allergies than dog allergies.

Pinpointing the cause of your allergies can be difficult when an animal lives in your home. That's because homes contain other allergens, such as dust mites, which could cause similar symptoms. It's important to see an allergist to confirm a pet allergy.

It can be hard to admit that the cat you love is causing health issues. Many people choose to endure symptoms rather than get rid of their pet. If you're determined to live with Fluffy, you can take steps to minimize the symptoms of your allergy.

Causes

Genetics appear to have a role in the development of allergies, meaning that you're more likely to experience them if you have family members who are also allergic.

Your immune system makes antibodies to fight off substances that might hurt your body, like bacteria and viruses. In a person who has allergies, the immune system mistakes an allergen for something harmful and starts making antibodies to fight it. This is what causes allergy symptoms such as itching, runny nose, skin rashes, and asthma.

In the case of cat allergies, allergens can come from your cat's dander (dead skin), fur, saliva, and even their urine. Breathing in pet dander or coming into contact with these allergens can cause an allergic reaction. Pet allergen particles can be carried on clothes, circulate in the air, settle in furniture and bedding, and stay behind in the environment carried on dust particles.

Symptoms

You don't have to own a cat to be exposed to the allergen. That's because it can travel on people's clothes. Cat allergies may not appear for several days if your sensitivity or allergen levels are low.

Common signs of a cat allergy usually follow shortly after you come in contact with cat dander, saliva, or urine. The cat allergen that over 90 percent of people with cat allergies react to comes from cat saliva and skin. It's found in higher levels on male cats and is transferred to a cat's fur during grooming. The allergen can cause swelling and itching of the membranes around your eyes and nose, usually leading to eye inflammation and a stuffy nose. Some people may develop a rash on their face, neck, or upper chest in response to the allergen.

Fatigue is common in untreated allergies, as is an ongoing cough due to postnasal drip. But symptoms such as fevers, chills, nausea, or vomiting should be considered related to an illness rather than allergies.

If you are cat allergic and cat allergens get into your lungs, the allergens can combine with antibodies and cause symptoms. These can include difficulty breathing, coughing, and wheezing. Cat allergies can cause an acute asthma attack and can be a trigger for chronic asthma.

Up to 30 percent of people with asthma can have a severe attack upon coming into contact with a cat. You should talk to your doctor about a treatment plan if your symptoms become disruptive or uncomfortable.

How to treat cat allergies

Avoiding the allergen is best, but when that's not possible, the following treatments may help:

- antihistamines, such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl), loratadine (Claritin) or cetirizine (Zyrtec)
- corticosteroid nasal sprays such as fluticasone (Flonase) or mometasone (Nasonex)
- over-the-counter decongestant sprays
- cromolyn sodium, which prevents the release of immune system chemicals and may reduce symptoms
- leukotriene inhibitors, such as montelukast (Singulair)
- allergy shots known as immunotherapy (a series of shots that desensitize you to an allergen)
- Buy Benadryl, Claritin, or Flonase now.

Home remedies

Nasal lavage is a home remedy for symptoms of cat allergies. Salt water (saline) is used to rinse your nasal passages, reducing congestion, postnasal drip, and sneezing. Several over-the-counter brands are available. You can make salt water at home by combining 1/8 teaspoon of table salt with 8 ounces of distilled water.

According to National Institutes of Health, butterbur (an herbal supplement), acupuncture, and probiotics may improve the symptoms of seasonal allergies. However, research is limited. It's not clear how effective these products would be specifically for pet allergies. Herbal remedies that show potential benefits are those that share a similar action in the body compared to traditional medications.

Best air purifiers for cat allergies

High-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters are one of the best defenses against cat allergies. They reduce airborne pet allergens by forcing air through a special filter that traps pet dander, as well as pollen, dust mites, and other allergens.

Cat allergies in infants

There is ongoing debate among scientists whether infants who are exposed to animals at a very young age are destined to develop allergies, or if the opposite is true. Recent studies have come to conflicting conclusions. A 2015 study found that exposing infants to cats and dogs at home is associated with a higher risk of developing allergies during the first four years of the child's life.

On the other hand, a 2011 study found that babies who live with cats, especially during the first year of life, develop antibodies to the pet and were less likely to acquire an allergy later.

A 2017 study found that cats and dogs may provide a benefit by exposing babies to certain healthy bacteria early in life. The study concluded that babies exposed to a cat or dog in the home during pregnancy may have fewer problems with allergies in the future than babies who weren't exposed.

Your doctor will be able to answer questions you may have about your baby and your cat. For children who are allergic, removing fabric toys and stuffed animals and replacing them with plastic or washable ones may help relieve symptoms.

Reducing cat allergies

Avoidance is best to prevent the allergies in the first place. But if you discover you're allergic to your cat, there are other options than getting rid of your pet. Consider these strategies for reducing your symptoms.

- Keep the cat out of your bedroom.
- Wash your hands after touching the cat.
- Remove wall-to-wall carpeting and upholstered furniture. Wood or tiled flooring and clean walls help reduce allergens.
- Select throw rugs or furniture covers that can be washed in hot water, and wash them frequently.
- Cover heating and air-conditioning vents with a dense filtering material such as cheesecloth.
- Install an air cleaner.
- Change the filters on air conditioning units and furnaces frequently.
- Keep the humidity level in your home at around 40 percent.
- Vacuum weekly with a HEPA filter vacuum.
- Use a face mask while dusting or cleaning.

Recruit a nonallergic person to regularly dust the home and clean the litter box. If you have a severe cat allergy, talk to your doctor about immunotherapy for a long-term treatment solution.

Source:

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